

*Edmund Laing*

LETTERS

TO THE

PEOPLE OF NORTH BRITAIN,

ON THE UNIVERSALLY ALLOWED CORRUPTION OF THE  
COMMONS HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT, AND THE IN-  
DISPENSIBLE NECESSITY OF ITS IMMEDIATE AND  
RADICAL ———, THE ONLY MEASURE FROM  
WHENCE UNANIMITY AND ENERGY CAN BE EX-  
PECTED EVEN IN THE PERILOUS PERIOD OF WAR.

By NORMAN MACLEOD,

MEMBER OF THE SCOTCH CONVENTION, AND M. P.

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# LETTERS

FROM

*COLONEL MACLEOD,*

CHAIRMAN OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR PARLIAM-  
ENTARY REFORM IN SCOTLAND.

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London, St. Albans's-street, Jan. 1, 1793.

SIR,

**H**AVING had the honour to be the first member of our present Legislature who had the virtue openly to join the Associations of the People of Scotland, instituted for the purpose of obtaining a reform in Parliament, I feel the strongest impulse to address the Associations at this interesting and alarming period. My heart, Sir, trembles when I write; not from any personal consideration; for all that I am, or ever can be, I freely devote to the People; but it trembles with apprehension of the dangers which threaten the liberty of this country.

The transactions which have lately taken place in the seat of Government: the calumnies which have been industriously thrown on the great body of the People: the Associations which have been formed against the principles of freedom; the attacks which have been made on the liberty of the press; the strong tendency of the aristocracy, to encrease rather than to

watch the power of the Executive Government, may appal for a moment the minds of men, but it is in moments like these that the people can and ought to know their real friends.

It is, therefore, my design, in this address, to explain to the People of Scotland the real situation of this nation at this instant; and to point out, to the best of my poor abilities, their causes of fear, and their sources of hope.

Great advantage has been taken of some unhappy circumstances which have attended the French Revolution, to cry down the cause of Reform in this Country: the destruction of a despotic throne has been represented as a probable precedent for the demolition of a limited Monarchy; the extinction of the most degenerated set of nobles that ever existed in any kingdom, has been stated as the forerunner of the ruin of our respectable peerage; the cruelties which have been committed at Paris by a few execrable ruffians, have been imputed to the whole French nation; and we are now insulted with affected apprehensions that similar atrocities may be expected in the capitals of London and Edinburgh.

History, however, without affronting France, furnishes me, by a long chain of events, with this pleasing truth, that in all our national convulsions, though blood has been shed profusely in the field, sometimes too lavishly on the scaffold, yet never have we been tainted with the crimes of popular executions or assassinations.

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The national character, I trust, is not changed ; the same firmness, regulated by justice ; the same valour, chastened by tenderness ; the same boldness in the cause of freedom, softened by mercy, which dignified our ancestors, are, I trust, still the inborn virtues of their posterity. Let, then, the people judge of those men who stigmatize them with the opposite qualities ; who poison the Royal ear, with insinuations or disaffection ; who alarm the nobility with groundless fears of annihilation ; and who frighten the people with the bugbears of massacres and confusion.

Such is the policy of the present day ; and, to the disgrace of the understanding of the public, it has been wonderfully successful in South Britain. No man, who is not deeply interested in corruption, denies, that a reform of the representation of the people in Parliament is desirable ; but the people are told, that they are not to be trusted at this juncture with their own concerns : that France is so free that Britain will desire to be *too* free ; and that they must wait till it suits the conveniency of their governors to remedy the defects of the government.

Another and dangerous idea seems to be now abroad that the Public is in a fever ; that it is, therefore, necessary to physic its pulse, and bleed its body by a war ; and that the constitution cannot be preserved unless the people are reduced and debilitated. Now I cannot conceive a more diabolical proposition than this ;

your strength is to be taken from you, that like a maimed and mutilated animal, you may be more easily ridden.

The great body of men in England are not so well instructed in the nature of government as their fellow subjects in Scotland. Reading is not so general; and their grievances are not so great. Farmers, manufacturers, artizans, and, in short, most descriptions of men, *may* have in England some voice in the election of their representatives; in Scotland *never*: and this cruel difference of situation is well known to our statesmen.

Having now shewn you the dark side of the picture, it is time to look at a brighter part of it. Knowledge is in a state of the most rapid progression; and all the endeavours to suppress its diffusion tend, like pressure upon a spring, to encrease its force and energy. I particularly rejoice that my countrymen of every rank are well-informed; and it has been my proud boast in distant climes, that I could scarcely meet with a farmer or tradesman in Scotland, with whom I could not enjoy a rational, instructive, and well supported conversation. Such a people are marked by the finger of God to possess, sooner or later, the fullest share of liberty, which is compatible with that order and those institutions which form the basis of well regulated communities. Reform may be combated, and will be combated, by men of great talents in high situations; but no talents, and no situations, can  
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long resist the natural progress of human reason, directed and urged forward by the strongest feelings of the human heart.

There is in this country a man seemingly formed by the Almighty goodness for its salvation at this most dangerous crisis : Genius, eloquence, truth, courage and patriotism have chosen his breast for their favourite residence ; the gentlest, but the strongest and most benevolent affections, reign in his heart ; he loves the people with the most ardent enthusiasm ; and a life of the greatest political activity and celebrity, that ever distinguished any statesman, has been spent in the noblest and most persevering struggles for their liberties and welfare : he knows their interests deeply, largely, and minutely : Experience of every attack which can be made on the Constitution, has furnished him with the most powerful methods of defence ; and his abilities, his fortitude, and his endurance are now in the fullest vigour. There is a melancholy possibility but thank God ! no probable prospect, either from his age or his health, that Providence, as a punishment for our crimes, may snatch this man from the people whom he loves : If a misfortune so much to be deprecated by every rational inhabitant of these kingdoms should arrive, it is yet a comfort to know that there exists '*Spes altera Romæ* ;' There is a younger man, endowed with power which God rarely bestows, and which he generally intends for the greatest and most beneficial purposes. To talents of the highest



order, he unites industry, perseverance, and an unquenchable thirst of knowledge ; he has drank in the richest fountains of political science ; his mind is stored with the most genuine philosophy of liberty, and its divinest doctrines come amended from his tongue. Mankind must rejoice that this man is one of the first authors and best supporters of the ASSOCIATIONS OF THE FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE.

BUT, Sir, great as are the hopes which we may entertain from the exertions of such men as I have been describing, the people have still a stronger reliance, that is, upon *themselves*. If, by a sudden volition of the Diety, every member of the present Legislature were at once annihilated, the people of Great Britain would still remain ; abilities, virtue, learning, would still be extant ; and the security and happiness of the many might be still preserved.

This incontrovertible truth will probably receive the strongest confirmation and elucidation from the existence of those numerous associations which have lately been unwittingly formed under the patronage of his Majesty's Ministers for the support of their ill-gotten power. They have invited men to assemble, on strange and novel principles, indeed ; but it is impossible that men so assembled, and struck into frequent collisions, should not soon discern the spark of truth. In every club there must be some leaders ; to these leaders there must be some opponents : each must study ; each must exert the faculties



faculties and energies of the human mind ; so that I fairly augur, from the most desperate attempts against reform, its final and complete success.

Permit me now to offer my humble but sincere advice to the people of Scotland at this critical juncture. My heart has led me to employ my best faculties in studying their real interests : to them my time, my fortune, my life are dedicated ; I look for no reward but that first of enjoyments, “ *Mens sibi conscia recti* : ”—even reputation, the most tempting lure to generous minds, is light to me, compared with the welfare of my country.

By violence, you can do nothing ; by constitutional patience and endeavours you will accomplish all your objects. The English mind is now awakened to the grievance of Scotland and Ireland ; and the most abject followers of the Ministry now confess, that some attention must be paid to these countries. I cannot, however, disguise from you the different predicaments in which they stand : Ireland is a strong man, who has demanded, Scotland is enfeebled, and must supplicate. We are not now that nation which coped with the Edwards and Henrys ; we are disarmed, we are not trusted with the defence of our lives, of our property, of our wives, and of our children. Our valour, a gift bestowed on us pre-eminently by our Maker, may be wasted in foreign quarrels ; but we are considered in  
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the scale of nations as little better than a conquered province. If Scotland, at any time, testifies a sense of her degraded situation; if her sensibility seems to wink at the most stabbing insults; if her reason demands relief from the most oppressive grievances, the militia of England is instantly arrayed by proclamation against ideal Scotch insurrections. Oh! magnanimous Ministry, are you ready to march your armed forces against a defenceless people? but you are not aware that we have more formidable arms than cannons or musquet, not the air drawn daggers of Mr. Burke, but the shield of JUSTICE, and the sword of REASON. March your standing army, march your militia into the heart of Scotland; my countrymen will greet them with peace and welcome---with hospitality and fraternity: they will receive them into their houses, and will communicate to them the knowledge of those rights which are essential to the happiness of mankind.

The Constitution of Great Britain, though slid from its basis, is most undoubtedly excellent. Although I cannot be guilty of that vile adulation which states it as the perfection of human wisdom; a constitution which admits of unbounded expence: under which the Nation has been involved in such frequent, such ruinous, and such disastrous wars, cannot be the *perfection* of human wisdom. Yet, I readily admit that its form is admirable; and that it needs but a few repairs

repairs to attain to the utmost excellence of which the frail works of man are susceptible.

Doctrines, however, completely hostile and destructive to all the best principles of this justly boasted Constitution, and entirely repugnant to its very nature and essence, have been lately maintained, and they have hitherto not met with the reprobation which they deserve. This monstrous idea has been proposed :--- “ That  
 “ the Constitution of England knows no such  
 “ thing as the People ; that it recognises the  
 “ King as the sole Sovereign Lord of all—it  
 “ acknowledges the two Houses of Parliament  
 “ as parts of the Legislature ; that these three  
 “ Estates form the Nation ; and that the Con-  
 “ stitution knows nothing of the rest of the  
 “ inhabitants of this country, as a Nation, or  
 “ as a People.”

Were these really the maxims of the Constitution, it would indeed be time to tear it from its foundations ; for a worse could not arise in its stead :—but such assertions are false and libellous. The Constitution, as established by its fundamental laws, maintains, that all Sovereignty is derived from the People ; that all the powers lodged in the King, Lords, and Commons, in Parliament assembled, proceed from the People, and ought to be exercised only for their good.

It is ridiculously argued by those men who support this glaring absurdity of the non-existence of the People in the British Constitution,



that there is no definition in any law books of the thing, or word People; as if the being of mankind depended on the metaphysics or subtleties of lawyers.

But, to silence these arguers for ever, I will now furnish them with as eloquent, as concise, and as perspicuous a definition of the word and thing "People," as ever was given of any of the objects of the science of Government; and to me it is doubly valuable and dear, as it comes from a body of men in Ireland, distinguished by the love of Liberty, and closely united in the same glorious cause of Reform with the Friends of the People in-Britain.

In an Address to us from the United Irishmen of Dublin, is the following passage:—

"If we be asked. Who are the People?  
 "We turn not our eyes here and there, to this  
 "party or to that persuasion, and cry, 'Lo!  
 "the People;' but we look around as without  
 "partiality or predilection, and we answer,  
 "The multitude of Human Beings, the living  
 "mass of Humanity, associated to exist, or subsist,  
 "and to be happy. In them, and them  
 "only, we find the original of social authority,  
 "the measure of political value, and the pedestal  
 "of legitimate power."

With grief, I observe, that since I went to London to attend my duty to Parliament, the friends of Administration, in conjunction with some time and feeble minded men, have thrown impediments and delay in the progress of a bill



carefully digested and greatly approved by the united wisdom of the Gentry of Scotland, for the correction of the laws of Election in the Counties. A principle, or rather a most detestable prejudice, seems to pervade our higher ranks at present; that whatever is given to the people, is taken from the government. I must, therefore, submit in the mean time, to this delay; but I pledge myself to the middle order of Landholders in Scotland, that while I have a heart to feel, a tongue to utter, or a friend to beseech I will never abandon their object.

A beam of satisfaction now breaks upon my mind.—The cause of the cities and burghs will be soon resumed by that enlightened genius to whom they are already bound by the strongest ties of gratitude. Strange it is to tell, but I have heard it said, with matchless effrontery, in the House of Commons, that no statues would be erected in Scotland to this admirable person, for his steady, splendid, and generous efforts in behalf of the people; but I have lived to see the statues, or effigies of his hard champion and bold assertor, suffer all the indignities which could be suggested by the coldest contempt, or warmest indignation of his countrymen. Here, however, let me deprecate all such proceedings in future: violences of every kind only strengthen our enemies, and even such marks of popular notice, confer a celebrity beyond the merits of the man.

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I perceive that an Association of the Gentlemen in and near Edinburgh, has been lately formed under the specious pretence of supporting peace and good order. Who does not see that under these flattering appearances, the real design is to foment the present delusion? The Gentlemen, it is said, have threatened to withdraw their employment from those tradesmen, or artificers, who shall dare to think or talk of Reform. The rich are said to be arrayed against the poor; but, I do sincerely exhort the poor and virtuous to contend only with the arms of loyalty and moderation.

And now, my Countrymen, for this time, I bid, you fare well: accept of my heartfelt and disinterested love; and receive, as its best testimony, my honest and sincere advice. Be not rash; be not impetuous; imitate the great pattern of long suffering; venerate the Constitution as it is; and search only for loyal and gentle corrections. I am.

SIR,

Your most faithful, and most obedient servant,

NORMAND MACLEOD.

To the Chairman of the Association of the Friends of the People at Edinburgh.

Edinburgh, George-street, Jan. 9 1798.

SIR,

Since I had the honour of addressing you, on the first of the New Year, a circumstance has happened which has confirmed all my hopes, and justifies all my advice my countrymen contained in that letter. Mr. Secretary Dundas has given two notices in the House of Commons; one for the repeal of the tax on Seaborn Coal, and another for the establishment of a Scotch Militia. It gives me infinite satisfaction to find, that even the breast of a Minister was fired with the same indignation that I felt for the degradation of Scotland, in being deprived of the natural and honourable right of bearing arms in her own defence; but it has given me more satisfaction to find, that the spirit, the temper, the moderation, and the constitutional firmness which have been displayed by the People, begin to produce their proper effects. Let me, therefore, exhort them to persevere in the same line of conduct; to abstain from every charge which can be construed into heat or violence; to adopt nothing but the most constitutional forms and methods of proceeding; but to remain united, undismayed, and resolute in their just demands. I think I can now venture to promise them, at no very distant period, the accomplishment of their wishes in a just Reform  
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of Parliament; and I promise them, that till that is obtained, I, and my friends, will not shrink from our post, but freely devote ourselves to their interests. I am,

SIR,

Your faithful and obedient servant,

NORMAN MACLEOD,

To the Chairman of the Association for Parliamentary Reform in Edinburgh,

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